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RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS 0204
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RUEHDA/AMCONSUL ADANA 4344
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SUBJECT: TURKISH MEDIA CRUCIFY PATRIARCH, THEN RECANT

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ANKARA 00001825 001.3 OF 002

11. (U) SUMMARY: Turkish media and political figures initially criticized Greek Patriarch Bartholomew for his perceived anti-GOT comments on the December 20 "60 Minutes" program. But the harshness of the commentary ebbed as columnists re-examined the Patriarch's comments through the prism of minority rights in Turkey. Following Turkish government officials' criticism, however, several articles openly discussed the Patriarch's assertion of second class citizenship in Turkey. END SUMMARY

Sensationalist Fodder for a Tired Press

12. (U) The Patriarch's "60 Minutes" observations on his struggle for the reopening of Halki Seminary and the continuation of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul provided sensationalist fodder for a Turkish press seemingly exhausted by reports of terrorist attacks, parliamentary upheaval and national unrest. Initial extensive and predominantly negative reports appeared December 20 ahead of the program and zeroed in on the Patriarch's "I feel crucified" and "like a second class citizen" comments. As reported REFTEL, comments by Turkish FM Davutoglu and other officials were widely disseminated.

13. (U) The invective continued with mainstream, pro-government HaberTurk's Yigit Bulut's complaint that "Bartholomew is giving the wrong information. The closure of Halki seminary was a result of the Patriarch's insistence on disobeying Turkish laws and its claims to treat the seminary with ecumenical status." Even liberal Radikal expressed disappointment. Radikal's conservative columnist Akif Beki - the former press advisor to PM Erdogan - labeled the CBS interview as "threatening" and concluded: "by making such statements, the Patriarch cannot gain anything positive for his cause."

Day Two: Low Status for Minorities Rings True

14. (U) After the initial media blitz, however, by December 21 Turkish pundits began assessing the Patriarch's words from the perspective of minority rights in Turkey. Mainstream Hurriyet's Mehmet Yilmaz told those criticizing the Patriarch: "don't get

upset, just look in the mirror," noting that there is a solid basis for minorities to feel like second-class citizens and that "Turkey should deal with the problem rather than just reacting." Meanwhile, Milliyet noted that "you crucified me" or "me stavronis" is a typical expression in Greek society and quoted an official from the Patriarchate that it was not aimed at the government.

Day Three: "Let's Not Fool Ourselves"

15. (U) By day three, the debate turned inward with leading columnists lambasting the GoT for its slow pace on minority rights and empty promises regarding Halki Seminary. Writing in the tabloid Posta, leading TV commentator Mehmet Ali Birand called for the government to keep its promises and act with courage. In "Yes We are Crucifying Him," Birand notes "Bartholomew has every right to get upset. Along with a disinformation campaign against the Patriarchate for many years, as well as never-ending conspiracies about its intention, the AKP government failed to keep its promises." Birand adds that "nobody should be surprised if Bartholomew goes to the European Commission on Human Rights." In "Who Is Right?" mainstream Hurriyet senior columnist Oktay Eksi observed: "Whenever the Patriarch had meetings with PM Erdogan, he repeatedly brought up the same two issues -- reopening of Halki Seminary and the return of properties." In return, Eksi says the Patriarch only got "evasive answers or false promises."

16. (U) Others looked to history for commentary. In "Crucifixion and Other Forms," Hurriyet's Sedat Ergin reviewed a decades-long list of violations against individual and minority rights, and countered FM Davutoglu's "we do not crucify" argument by saying "you are right Mr. Minister, we don't crucify but we certainly violate human rights in many other forms." In "Mentality Change is Needed,"

ANKARA 00001825 002.3 OF 002

Mehmet Barlas in Sabah opines: "The issue is treating every individual and every group as equal citizens. . .this requires a major mentality change." Dogan Satmis in mainstream HaberTurk underlines a double standard: "How one can explain the closure of Greek Orthodox schools if Turkey genuinely considers this community as 100 percent Turkish citizens?" Referring the latest State Department Religious Freedom Report, the pundit adds: "Turkey is listed among countries with democracy but characterized as limiting religious freedoms significantly; so let's not fool ourselves anymore."

17. (U) While a front page story in Islamist and pro-Saadet Party daily Milli Gazete used the headline "Bartholmew Went Over His Limits," other conservative media had adopted a more reasoned approach by December 22. Writing in Today's Zaman (English), Yavuz Baydar chastened Davutoglu for his hurried retort to the Patriarch, when Turkish leaders "are fully aware of the problems of non-Muslim minorities in Turkey. The only thing that seems rational is to go ahead with whatever reforms are necessary." Meanwhile, Taha Kivanc from Islamist Yeni Safak opined that Halki Seminary is the key to the problem and predicts that Education Minister Cubukcu will likely announce new measures in early 2010. Circulation giant Zaman did not editorialize on December 22, but carried an exclusive interview with Patriarchate Spokesman Dositeos Anagnostopoulos, who emphasized "the crisis over crucifixion demonstrates the need for dialogue." The paper played up the spokesman's comment that "when the Patriarch talked about feeling like a second class citizen, he did not mean Turks are intolerant to Christians, but the leaders of Turkey should be able to address problems we have as well. We want not only tolerance but also we want solution to our problems."

18. (SBU) COMMENT: While Patriarch Bartholomew's assent to a leading CBS metaphor clearly raised the GoT's hackles and offended Turkish national sensitivities, the fast shift in direction of the media commentary is notable, and may owe much to the Patriarch's reputation as a respected and sincere spokesman on these issues. In addition, it seems to be widely acknowledged that the GoT's record on Halki remains a series of largely unfilled promises.

